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First Person: A Day With Sangham Radio

Pete Tridish, 05/08/2015

ZAHEERBAD, India — During a recent technical survey of community radio in India conducted by my organization, [International Media Action](#), I was invited to visit Sangham Radio. This station in Zaheerbad, owned by the [Deccan Development Society](#), was the first community radio station to go on the air in India, in October of 2008.

The society has some 6,000 members, who earn their living as laborers and farmers. All pay 50 rupees per year (about US\$ 1) to support the radio station. All are part owners of the station. The 6,000 members of the society are Dalits, the lowest caste, which was once called “untouchable.” While discrimination based on caste is now illegal, it is still pervasive in Indian society. Since most land and wealth in India was acquired under conditions of legal discrimination, most Dalits today continue to do the worst jobs, and most live in poverty.



*Pete Tridish works with the Sangham Radio staff in Telangana.
Photo by Kanchan K. Malik*

RADIO'S IMPORTANCE

The women from the sanghams (women's collectives) make lots of videos about issues of importance to them. Even though many are illiterate, a number of the women have become quite accomplished with audio and video recording and production. The women show a great deal of concern about how they are represented in media. They described the perceived difference between when they make videos or audio reports versus the ones made by outsiders. Outsiders come with all the shots planned out and a few words they want the women to say, all decided before the filmmaker even arrives. Then when the video is finished, it seems like the women had made the filmmakers point.

When the women started, they were intimidated by all of the equipment. But, as they learned to use it, they felt that they made much better videos and audio reports themselves than the ones

made by outsiders. (Reflecting on this, please understand that I am paraphrasing the translations of what the women said to me while I was there, rather than trying to recreate their exact words.)

Just about all programming is prerecorded, and then edited before going on air. The station records two hours of programming per day. They do no live shows, and they take no syndicated content.

During this sort of visit, since radio engineers do not often visit stations like this, I typically do as much troubleshooting as I can. We looked at issues with their transmitter power output, their transmission lines, and lightning protection, all of which the group was anxious to improve. I also remarked in passing that with the existing equipment, it would be quite easy to repeat shows later in the day, or replay certain “evergreen” programs or music. I mentioned that most groups where I come from play their stations 24 hours a day, with little more effort and great convenience for listeners who are sometimes busy when a favorite program is on the air.

We asked the women about this, and their disinterest in the idea was immediate. “We all work all day in the fields; we don’t listen to radio there. We need to talk, plan, make decisions, and sing together in the fields,” they said. “We would not want to displace all those community hours together being entertained by a radio, like passive consumers. We listen to radio in a focused time in the evenings when we need to learn important new things, and we give it our attention then.”



Pete Tridish is pictured with P.V. Satheesh, director of the Deccan Development Society in Telangana. Photo courtesy DDS

CHOICE

This answer gave a unique window upon their views on technology, and even more than that it gave me a mirror to look at my own cultural attitudes and assumptions. It was striking that they took the radio so seriously and paid full attention to it.

In my world, radio is what you listen to when you are doing something else boring, like driving, cooking, cleaning, working. And even more striking: for people in wealthy countries, so much of our relationship to technology is that it is an inexorable force that we must keep up with, whether it does us any good or not.

The concern for displacing our social relations with passive entertainment is so far past for us, it is almost invisible. The Dalit women’s experience with agribusiness, the Bhopal gas disaster, and “development” schemes has made them more circumspect in adopting technologies which experts push. Their critical analysis has a level of scrutiny beyond what most Westerners today are capable of, and their resolve to make technology work for the outcomes they choose is impressive.

I certainly could imagine reasonable arguments for other approaches to repeats of their broadcast, but next time some hyped up new technology comes along that I have to adopt, I will think of these women and how they feel that the choice is truly their own to make.

Learn more about the Deccan Development Society radio station from their website. It includes a number of very thought-provoking quotes from these women, fewer than 10 percent of whom are literate. To read an outline of a typical radio program broadcast on the station, visit <http://ddsindia.com/www/undp.htm>.

For information on the work of the UNESCO Chair for Community Media, which arranged my visit, including their Continuous Improvement Toolkit for Community Radio, see: <http://ucommmedia.in>.

Pete Tridish, based in Philadelphia in the United States, is the chief engineer at International Media Action, a nonprofit community radio engineering crew.